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ABSTRACT

High school guidance counselors' perceptions of the quality of The State University of New York College at Brockport were compared for 1982 and 1985. Quality assessments were also made for two university centers, nine university colleges, two agricultural and technical colleges, and two private colleges. The 1985 sample consisted of 839 counselors. In both 1982 and 1985, the survey instrument covered: communications between the Brockport campus and the guidance community; quality assessments of faculty, programs, students, and selectivity for each of the 15 competitor institutions; quality of specific programs at the Brockport campus; image impressions derived from multiple sources; types of students typically recommended to the Brockport campus; high school application and articulation trend data; and evaluation of Brockport graduates. In 1982, Brockport ranked far behind its competitors in the perceived quality of faculty, programs, students, and selectivity. The 1985 results showed major advances in all areas, particularly in faculty and programs, as a result of improvements that were implemented, including more selective admissions standards. (SW)

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Changing a College Image: Evaluating Admission Strategies Through Survey of High School Guidance Counselors' Perceptions

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for Management Research, Policy Analysis, and Planning

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Ann K. Dickey, Chair
Forum Publications Editorial
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Abstract

This study focuses on the changes in institutional quality perceived by high school guidance counselors. Identical surveys were conducted in 1982 and 1985 to examine competitive relationships, and the impact of improved admissions standards and contacts with the guidance community. In 1982, the State University of New York College at Brockport ranked far behind its competitors in the perceived quality of Faculty, Programs, Students and Selectivity. The 1985 results showed major advances in all areas, particularly in Faculty and Programs, as a result of the improvements that were implemented. This type of replication research is important since it provides the feedback loop to evaluate new initiatives.

Introduction and Perspectives

This institution, a four-year Arts and Science College, is part of the public multi-campus State University of New York system. Since 1976, Brockport has experienced a substantial enrollment decline of approximately 28%. As a part of a major public institution, there is a relative degree of security in terms of funding. However, it eliminates some of the obvious recruiting tactics, i.e. cost differential and financial aid packaging, since there is little differentiation within the system. Also, the availability of programs is almost universal. A matrix of program overlap indicates that nine of the eleven other four-year Arts and Science Colleges overlapped 35 of our 39 offerings by more than 50%. In addition, admissions applications are generally obtained in the high schools and are then sent directly to a central system processing center rather than directly to this institution. Prospective students pay a basic application fee to have their credentials sent to one college. A fee is charged for each additional college designated on the application. This has discouraged students from listing as many institutions as in the past, when three choices were part of the basic fee. It follows that developing a competitive edge regarding cost, financial aid and program uniqueness is very difficult at

best. Thus, it is imperative that this institution is designated as one of the top choices on the central application form.

In Summer 1981, a new president took office. During the ensuing year, major administrative and academic reorganizations and retrenchments occurred. Admissions standards were raised, effective with the Fall 1982 Semester. In addition, a major consulting firm was contracted to address the enrollment difficulties.

Purpose

In May 1982, a state-wide population survey to over 3200 high school guidance counselors was conducted. This survey constituted the research component recommended by the consulting firm as a means of determining quality images projected to this particular group involved in the student college selection process. Survey results were used to develop comparative quality images of competitor institutions, to develop our own baseline image profile for later comparison as the college increased its selectivity (see Table 1) and to elicit recommendations for improvements.

Table 1: Admissions Selectivity - Entering Freshmen

	Applications Received	Students Accepted		Students Enrolled	
	#	#	%	#	%
Fall 79	7767	6897	88.8	1657	24.0
Fall 80	7711	5583	72.4	1220	21.9
Fall 81	7685	4806	62.5	1052	21.9
Fall 82	7106	4430	62.3	1055	23.8
Fall 83	6713	3394	50.6	860	25.3
Fall 84	5933	3076	51.8	731	23.8
Fall 85	5736	2789	48.6	768	27.5

Changing an image is a difficult and a long term process. In the face of a 26% reduction in applications, we have continued to raise standards and have dropped our acceptance rate by 40% while increasing our yield. For the first time in many years, the Fall 1985 Semester shows an increase in full time freshmen over the previous year. In the Spring of 1985, the high school guidance counselor survey was repeated to determine changes in counselors' perceptions since the initial survey. It was expected that more selective admissions standards, new and improved publications, counselor newsletters and increased personal contact with counselors would produce more favorable results.

The focus of this paper is on the comparative quality profile differences for competitor institutions from the 1982 survey to the 1985 survey results. Quality assessments of faculty, programs, students and selectivity were made for

institutions which included both public and independent four-year universities and colleges and two-year agricultural and technical colleges. Regional, as well as state-wide comparisons were developed to highlight changes in geographical areas. By repeating this survey, we evaluated changes in our external image as we improved quality through higher admissions standards and selectivity.

Literature Review

Literature indicates the importance of guidance counselors as a source of information and influence during students' college selection process. As mentioned in "Multicampus Education from a Marketing Perspective" (Kotler, 1978), one means of furthering the admissions effort during the students' information gathering and inquiring periods is by improving contact with guidance counselors. In the Penn State Study, "How High School Students Select a College" (Gilmour, Spiro, Dolich, 1978), counselors seemed to be the primary source of information for higher ability students. Litten, in "Different Strokes in the Applicant Pool: Some Refinements in a Model of Student College Choice" (1982) stressed that in geographical areas with low parental education levels it is important to keep up contact with high school counselors. Hossler, in "Enrollment Management An Integrated Approach" (1984), cites Gregory Jackson's college choice model. According to Hossler, in Phase I of this model, Preference, students are influenced not only by

academic achievement and family background but also by significant others. Significant others include high school counselors. Zemsky and Oedel in "The Structure of College Choice" (1983) mention that families who are less mobil, regarding travel to college nights and campus visits, rely upon guidance counselors and recruitment mail for college information. And finally, in "Applying Marketing Research in College Admissions" (Litten, Sullivan, Brodigan, 1983), counselors, along with campus visits, parents and admissions offices, are listed as having overall influence during the college selection process. Litten and others indicate that a marketer should determine peoples' perceptions and evaluations of not only the types of institution but also the particular institution represented by the researcher. Various populations can be surveyed. Our college chose to begin with guidance counselors.

Data Sources

The major data source for the 1985 study was the same survey instrument administered in 1982 to all high school guidance counselors. It consisted of a four-page pamphlet. The first two pages addressed communications between Brockport and the guidance community; estimations of quality in terms of faculty, programs, students and selectivity for each of the fifteen competitor institutions; quality of specific program areas at this campus; image impressions derived from multiple sources; types of students typically

recommended to this college; high school application and matriculation trend data for this college; and finally, an evaluation of our graduates. The third page consisted of both high school and guidance counselor demographic information. Included were the size of the graduating class; number of students continuing their education at postsecondary institutions; distance from the campus; whether or not the counselor was ever enrolled or had visited the campus; sex; age group; and schools from which the counselor received undergraduate and graduate degrees. The entire fourth and final page was left open for comments and suggestions. The survey project, completed in July 1985, was designed to determine the impact of changes directed toward improving our perceived image in the high school guidance community.

Methodology

The survey instrument was developed in 1982 in collaboration with the President's Staff and the marketing consultant. In the 1985 study, the survey was mailed to the state-wide population of counselors, 2995. There were 839 valid responses for a 28% return rate which was above the 20.3% return rate for the previous survey. The increase was due to better survey administration, timing and improved follow-up mechanisms. Surveys were coded and statistical

analyses (frequencies, crosstabs, mean) were performed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (Nie, et al, 1979).

This paper focuses on the mean differences between the 1982 and 1985 survey results for the four quality indicators of Faculty, Academic Programs, Students and Selectivity for two university centers, nine university colleges, two agricultural and technical colleges and two independent institutions. The comparative value differences were developed at the State level and also for four geographical regions selected based on this college's concentration of enrollments, from those areas. Using a scale of 1-5 with 1=excellent and 5=poor, the responses were tabulated for the four criteria. The differences in the means from 1982 to the 1985 study were calculated and then graphed using Lotus 1-2-3 (See Figures 1 through 4).

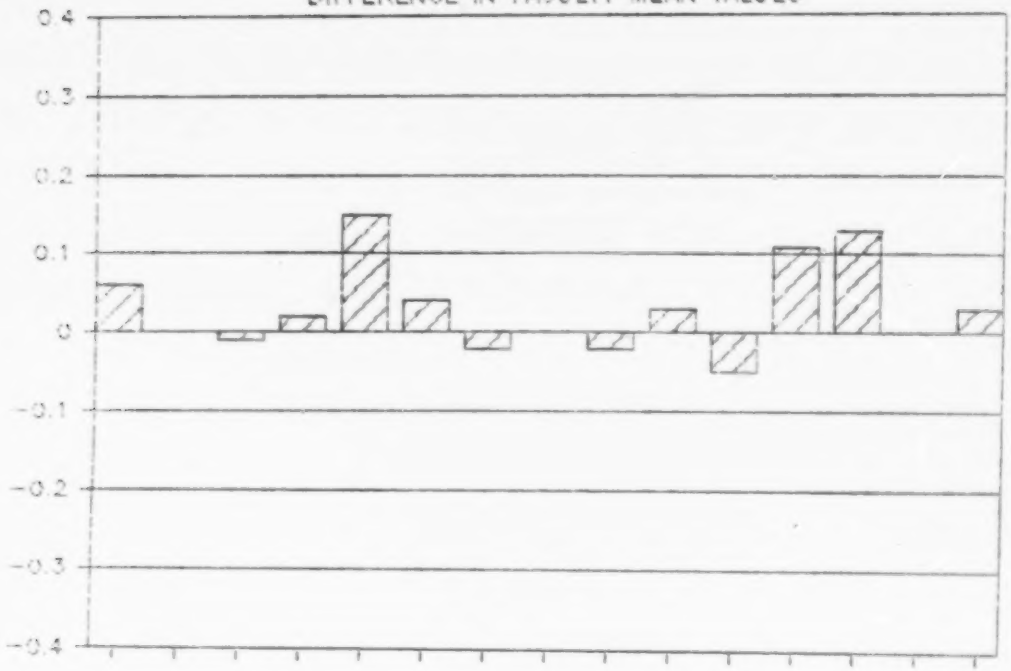
There has been no attempt to determine statistical significance between different means in these comparisons, but rather to show their relative magnitudes.

Results and Conclusions

Since we achieved a better response rate over the original survey, we wanted to be certain that the two surveys were comparable. Thus, we computed the response rate percentage of the total for each of the eight regions plus an Unknown category (see Table 2).

H.S. COUNSELOR SURVEY 1985

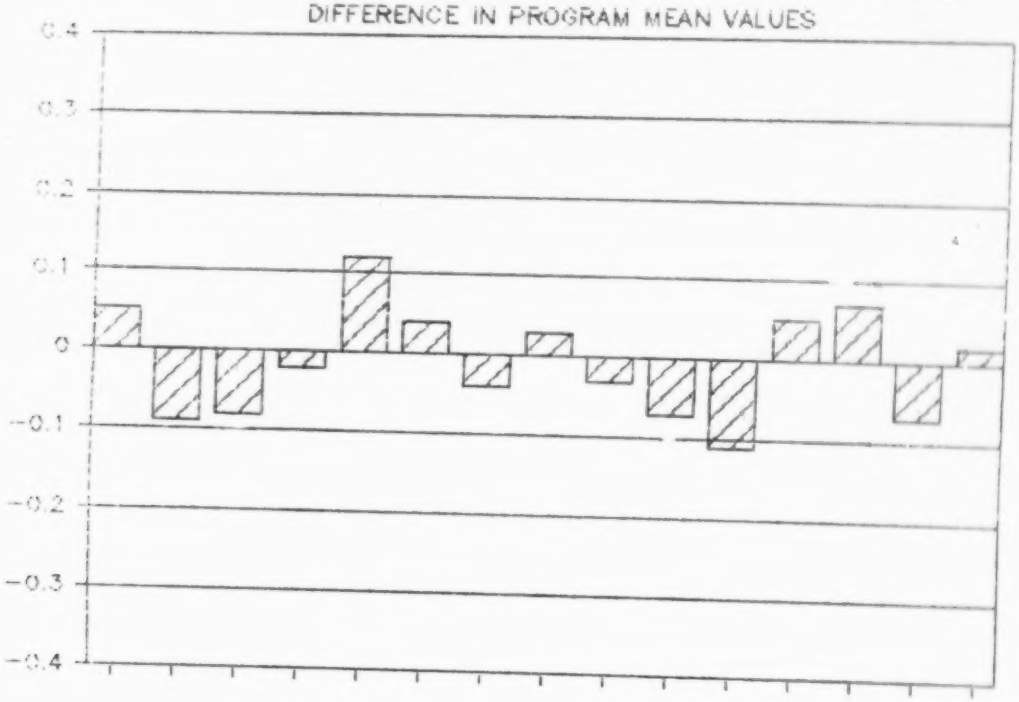
DIFFERENCE IN FACULTY MEAN VALUES



(1982 MEAN VALUES – 1985 MEAN VALUES)

H.S. COUNSELOR SURVEY 1985

DIFFERENCE IN PROGRAM MEAN VALUES



(1982 MEAN VALUES – 1985 MEAN VALUES)

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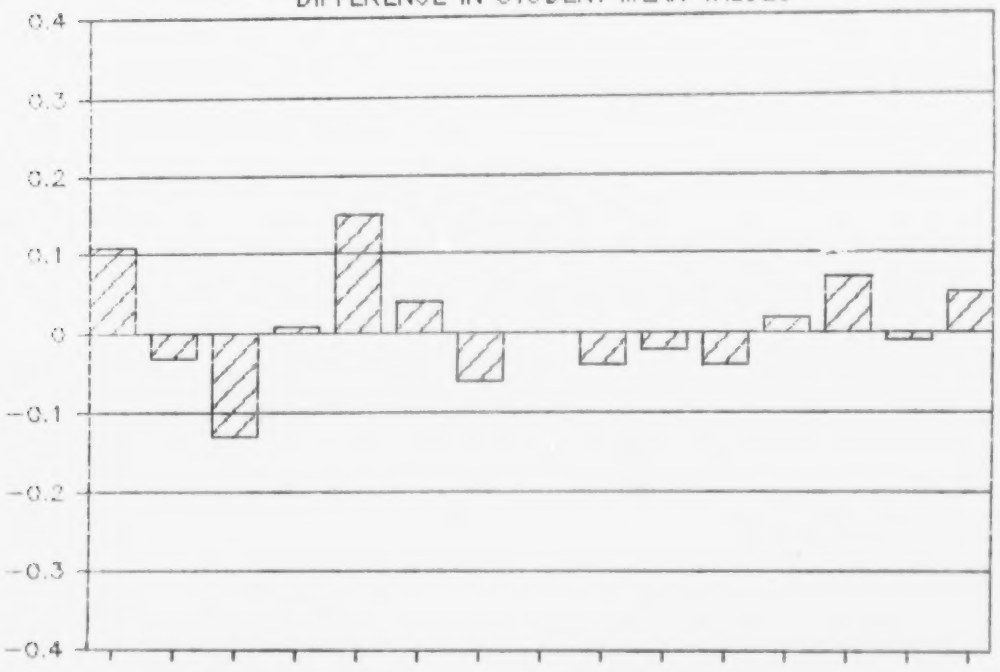
H.S. COUNSELOR SURVEY 1985

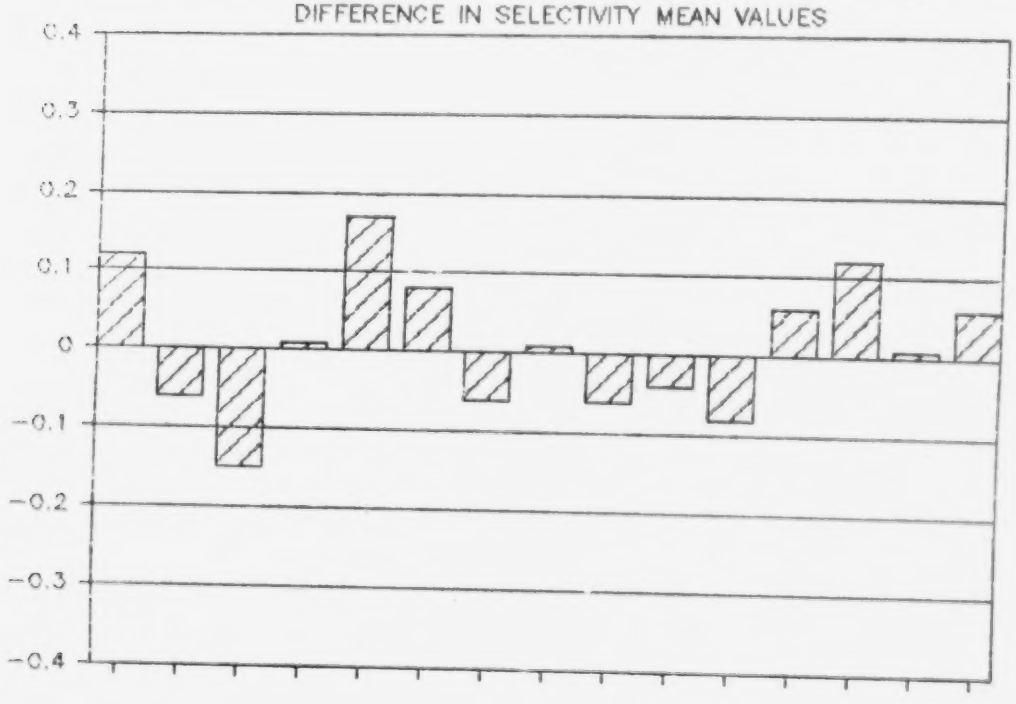
DIFFERENCE IN STUDENT MEAN VALUES



(1982 MEAN VALUES – 1985 MEAN VALUES)

H.S. COUNSELOR SURVEY 1985

DIFFERENCE IN SELECTIVITY MEAN VALUES



(1982 MEAN VALUES – 1985 MEAN VALUES)

Table 2: Comparison of Regional Response Rates

1982 and 1985 Counselor Surveys

Region	1985		1982	
	N	%	N	%
1. Western New York	105	12.5	84	12.7
2. Genesee Valley	134	16.0	95	14.4
3. New York City	85	10.1	74	11.2
4. Long Island	158	18.8	119	18.0
5. Central New York	98	11.7	75	11.4
6. Northern New York	15	1.8	21	3.2
7. Northeast New York	118	14.1	95	14.4
8. Hudson Valley	110	13.1	90	13.6
Unknown	16	1.9	7	1.1
TOTAL	839		660	

After examining the percentages, we determined the surveys were indeed comparable.

The conclusion for the state-wide analysis is that SUNY Brockport is competitive based upon Faculty and Program mean quality ratings. Unfortunately, in comparison with the other institutions, counselors still perceive Students and Selectivity as the lowest. However, since 1982, high school counselors perceive that Brockport has achieved quality increases in all four areas. This is based on the mean differences determined for each of the variables. Thus, the college is closing the quality gap with the other colleges in Students and Selectivity.

Regional observations vary. For SUNY College at Brockport, the first four regions provide our largest pools and our highest draws. Therefore, in this report we concentrate on these four regions. In the Western New York Region, the pattern result is very similar in mean quality ratings and in mean differences to the total state. For the Genessee Valley Region, this institution is generally ranked lower than the other schools, especially for Students and Selectivity. But again, major quality increases since 1982 in all four areas have considerably narrowed the distance from the other institutions. The New York City Region is similar to the Statewide pattern in mean quality rating comparisons with the other institutions. But perceived declines in mean quality differences in Programs and Selectivity since 1982 are quite different from the Statewide pattern and the other three regions. In the Long Island Region, this institution is seen as similar in quality ratings for Faculty and Programs but is generally at the bottom of the group. For Students and Selectivity the quality ratings vary for all the institutions, but this institution is near the low end with one other public four-year college. Since 1982, the large increases reflected by mean quality differences has allowed Brockport to move much closer to the other colleges in these ratings.

For all the regions there is remarkable consistency in SUNY Brockport's mean quality ratings for each of the four variables, Faculty, Programs, Students and Selectivity. Increases in quality since 1982 in the Genessee Valley and Long Island Regions are very apparent.

As stated earlier, reversing an image is a long term process. Based upon this replicated study, we have made strides in the guidance community regarding our image profile. As a result of concerted effort since 1982, this institution has greatly raised its perceived image and reputation. It is important to continue the momentum by maintaining/increasing current efforts, such as, faculty and staff visits to school counselors, regional receptions for guidance counselors, college visits by the counselors, and counselor newsletters. None of this is done in isolation, other areas and issues such as enrollment management, retention, academic programming are simultaneously being addressed.

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